

Title of Module: Sentence Structure

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Video 1: Phrases and Phrase Structure

Module Overview

If asked to explain the meaning of a “sentence,” how would you respond? Most writers are able to give a definition of a sentence, but that definition is often inaccurate or incomplete. In this module, we will discuss what makes a sentence and overview the building blocks of sentences—phrases and clauses. We will also examine how clauses and phrases can be used to form sentences, as well as how they can be misused, leading to errors such as fragments. Above all, this module is designed to help you avoid certain common problems in academic writing so you can become a more effective writer.

What is a Phrase?

A phrase is a group of words that form a grammatical unit. For example, let's consider the word “research,” which can be used as a noun or a verb. When used as a noun, we can add words before and after it: for example, “the latest research,” or even “the latest research on severely underfunded public daycares.” In each of these examples, the central word is the noun

“research.” We call it the head of the phrase. On the other hand, words that describe the head, like the article “the” or the adjective “latest,” are called modifiers. Unlike the mandatory head, modifiers can be optionally added for more information.

Noun Phrases and Adjective Phrases

If we look more closely at the noun phrase “the latest research on severely underfunded free daycares,” we can find other phrases within it, such as the prepositional phrase “on severely underfunded public daycares.” In addition, the noun phrase contains embedded adjective phrases: “latest,” “severely underfunded,” and “public.” One common trouble spot for writers is the placing of adjectives in the correct order. This is because, when multiple adjectives are used in English, they generally follow a predictable order. As a result, we can talk about “three beautiful, brown houses” or “my long, blue, silk evening gown,” but not about “three brown, beautiful houses” or “my long, silk, blue evening gown.” From these examples, we see that opinion adjectives like “beautiful” come before age adjectives like “old.” We also tend to describe shape, color, and material of an object in that order.

Other Types of Phrases

Now, let’s extend our phrase into a sentence, such as “Apparently, the presenters will very gladly discuss their latest research on severely underfunded public daycares at the panel tomorrow.” This sentence contains another type of phrase, the verb phrase “will very gladly discuss,” as well as five adverb phrases. Adverbs can be particularly tricky for writers to identify, because they can modify not only adjectives, as in “severely underfunded,” but also verbs, like “gladly discuss,” and even other adverbs, such as “very gladly.” Finally, adverbs can describe many different meanings, from manner (like “gladly”), to the time or place of an event (like “tomorrow”), to the speaker’s or writer’s attitude (like “apparently”). We will discuss the placement of adverbs in the next video.

Video 2: Simple Sentences and Common Troublespots

Independent Clause as a Simple Sentence

A clause is a grammatical unit that expresses some action, event, or idea. A clause can often function as a sentence in writing, but it is important to distinguish between these two terms. To understand them let’s examine the following example: “Padma applied for a new passport, and it will be mailed to her in two months.” Notice that this utterance contains two distinct statements or ideas: the fact that Padma applied for a new passport and that the passport will arrive in two months. Each of these statements is a separate clause, with its own subject and verb, and the two clauses are joined with the conjunction “and” to form a complex sentence.

So, we can say that a clause is a grammatical unit that expresses a distinct idea or event and that contains one subject and one main verb. On the other hand, a sentence is a set of words that contains at least one clause, with at least one subject and one main verb. A sentence with only one clause is called a simple sentence, while a sentence with multiple clauses is a complex sentence.

Typical Sentence Word Order

In English, a simple affirmative sentence typically follows the subject-verb-object word order, as in “The interpreter works with numerous clients.” While in some languages word order can be quite flexible, it is important to remember that English word order is very rigid. Consequently, we cannot say in standard English that “The interpreter with multiple clients works” (unless we are Yoda). Moreover, when adding a modifier that describes the time or place of an event, we must generally place this information at the very beginning or very end of our sentence, such as: “In the morning, the interpreter works with numerous clients across Boston.” Frequency adverbs have strict placement rules too. For example, we can say that “Tom always signs his name in cursive,” but not that “Tom signs always his name in cursive.”

Subject-Verb Agreement

(Script): A common troublespot for writers is subject-verb agreement, or the requirement in standard English for the verb and the subject to agree in number and person. Thus, if the subject of our sentence were the plural noun “interpreters,” the verb in the present tense should be “work” instead of “works”: “The interpreters work with numerous clients.” Subject-verb agreement can be especially tricky when the subject is very long, as in “The highly-recommended American Sign Language interpreter, has over forty clients **works** across Boston.” In this sentence, the head of the subject noun phrase is the singular noun “interpreter,” so it would be wrong to use the plural verb “work.”

Subject-Verb Agreement

(Script): Another common issue in writing arises with compound subjects, which contain nouns that are joined with the conjunction “and.” These subjects are grammatically plural, even if the individual nouns are singular, such as “Both the pianist and the cellist **were** out of tune.” Additionally, when the subject of a sentence is a verb phrase, the main verb in the sentence should be singular, as in “Citing at least six scholarly sources **is** required on the final paper.”

Subject-Verb Agreement

(Script): Finally, some sentences can contain dummy subjects, as in “It **is** a student’s responsibility to avoid plagiarism.” Because “it” is always grammatically singular, it requires a

singular verb. However, the other dummy subject, “there,” can require either a singular or a plural verb, depending on the noun that it is introducing, as in these examples: “There **have** been a lot of break-ins in our neighborhood recently.” but “There **is** a package on your front porch.” For more details on cases of unusual subject-verb agreement, you should consult an authoritative English grammar book or writing handbook.

Video 3: Clause Types and Fragments

Independent and Dependent Clauses

We know that a simple sentence contains one subject and one main verb, and presents a complete idea or event. This type of sentence is also called an independent clause. An example of an independent clause is: “The new movie adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* has received mixed reviews from critics.” If one of your friends were to say this statement out of the blue, you would get the gist of what they’re saying. But now imagine that your friend suddenly proclaims: “Because the new movie adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* has received mixed reviews from critics.” This clause sounds incomplete and is called a dependent clause or a subordinate clause. One clue that a clause is dependent is that it starts with a conjunction like “because,” “although,” or “while.” In academic English writing, a stand-alone dependent clause can never function as a sentence, and placing a period at the end of this clause results in an error called a fragment. Fragments are a common troublespot for writers.

Dependent Clauses as Fragments

A fragment can occur when a writer places a period after a dependent clause, such as “While we were waiting for the test results.” Because a simple sentence must contain at least one independent clause, we can fix this error simply by adding an independent clause, such as: “While we were waiting for the test results, the doctor patiently answered all our questions.” Another solution is to change the dependent clause into an independent clause, for example by deleting the conjunction: “We were waiting for the test results.”

Relative Clauses as Fragments

Another type of fragment occurs when a writer places a period after a standalone relative clause. A relative clause is a dependent clause that gives more information about a noun in the sentence; it usually begins with a relative pronoun like “who,” “what,” “where.” An example of a relative clause is “Which is on the second floor.” Because placing a period after a relative

clause results in a fragment, we should always join the relative clause with an independent clause. For example: "I'm subleasing my apartment, which is on the second floor."

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